

BOOK REVIEW

Inner Corrections: Inner Peace and Peace Making

Bo Lozoff and Michael Braswell

Anderson Publishing Co., Cincinnati, 1989

Reviewed by Ellen B. Gwynn

Many of the spiritual books we encounter are of two types: collections of talks given by an enlightened teacher or master, or books in which practitioners write about some aspect of the teachings or their particular application in meditation, non-violence or art. *Inner Corrections* is unusual in that it is by a practitioner who vividly demonstrates the dharma at work in his own life and in the lives of the people he works with: prisoners. Bo Lozoff, director of the Prison-Ashram Project, conducts workshops in prisons and corresponds with inmates all over the world, and is truly a bodhisattva. His co-author, Michael Braswell, writes about the criminal justice system.

Inner Corrections is a revision of Bo's previous book, *We're All Doing Time*, with a chapter of case studies added by Braswell that is geared toward classroom discussion. Bo encourages inmates to get off the path of criminality and to seek wisdom and truth, a spiritual path. Not only are inmates unable to voice the usual excuses for putting off spiritual

practice — lack of time, the need to support a family, etc. — but the incredibly tedious, demeaning, and often vicious prison environment provides more challenging opportunities for growth and maturity in a week that those of us on the outside may experience in a lifetime.

Many inmates naturally idealize life on the streets, thinking they would really have it made if they were back outside with access to sex, material goods, drugs, and so forth. But Bo tells them that people's minds are the same, inside and out: we all desperately pursue the world of appearances in the belief that things of that world will deeply satisfy us. Some choose criminal means, but the real source of peace and wisdom is inside each of us. Each person can discover this source by paying attention to one's own life, which requires slowing the pace of one's chase after the world of appearances and breaking the cycle of ignorant conduct. He provides inmates with time-honored methods for meaningful, positive changes: meditation to slow the mind down, yoga to open the body and mind, balanced diet and nutrition (within the parameters of prison food), prayer, and service to others.

The power of this book lies in the correspondence between Bo and the inmates. We read letter after letter from people who have committed unspeakable crimes and who have lived lives filled with violence and deceit, who slowly and surely change their direction by practicing meditation. For example, Maury writes Bo a letter reeking with hatred, castigating society for expecting prisons to "rehabilitate," fantasizing the extermination of society's hypocritical leaders who have themselves all "broken a law or two." Bo replies, "You could kill everyone in the world, and you'd still be sitting there the biggest loser of all, because you have no peace Everyone pays for their unkindness and unfairness, and you don't have to be the fool who delivers their punishment. That's just more karma for you."

When Lloyd hears another inmate brag about helping murder a friend of Lloyd's, Lloyd acts in keeping with his "old-fashioned . . . values and morals and living by the convict code" by beating the inmate into a coma. Bo responds, "You know, with good 'old-fashioned' convicts like you around, the state hardly needs the death penalty!" He goes on to say, "I'm not even saying you shouldn't have done what you did. All I'm saying is cut the shit, and face up to exactly what it was: a self-destructive, spiritually uncool act that came out of attachment and anger. It had nothing to do with living up to codes or moral values."

Mary Jo, an 18-year-old in prison for murder by arson, tells

Karuna

A Journal of Buddhist Meditation

A non-sectarian Buddhist publication focusing on . . .

- meditation in daily life
- spiritual practice and social change
- women and Buddhism

Subscriptions are \$15 for one year, \$28 for two years.

Sample copy is \$5.

Published 3 times a year by the Karuna Meditation Society.

Name _____ Date _____

Address _____ City _____

State _____ Postal Code _____



Send to:

Karuna Journal

P.O. Box 24468, Stn. C, Vancouver, B.C. V5T 4M5

Bo that she holds her feelings inside until finally she explodes by hurting herself or starting a fire. Bo suggests that she meditate, visualizing a small pink flame inside, and when scary or painful thoughts arise, watch them burn up in the flame. He urges her to feel her fears when they appear, and to use fire as a purifier. "The fire you're aching for is actually a very gentle flame — the eternal flame of your own beautiful spirit, your own heart. And what you need to burn in that fire is not buildings or children, but rather the confusion and pain which are buried in the past. You need to burn your pain into wisdom, the impure into the pure."

I hope these passages don't come across as "preachy" or ethereal, because Bo is anything but. That approach would not work with convicts. On the contrary, you get a strong sense from these letters that after corresponding with Bo, most of the inmates trust him, and sometimes he is the only person they trust. He speaks their language, but urges them to dig deeply and uncover their true selves underneath their hardened habitual ways of thinking and being. Bo demonstrates a strong "don't know" mind as he works through problems with inmates, rather than pretending to tell them the way it is. As one inmate said, in a letter thanking Bo for putting him in contact with another inmate who had embarked on the spiritual journey, "it is all due to your willingness to step outside societal prejudice and connect the seekers of this world, inside and out."

Bo Lozoff doesn't only help inmates. By publishing this book, he has opened my eyes to my own lack of faith in the dharma. I learned from these letters how much a spiritual practice can help anyone, in any circumstance, deal with anger, hatred, and delusion. This is an important understanding for me, because in my work within the criminal justice system it is important that I not be tempted to lump violent criminals together as a faceless, remorseless, hopeless, entity. (I read about the book in a publication by the American Bar Association, so I know other lawyers are reading this book as well.)

Incidentally, if you are interested in corresponding with inmates about Zen or meditation practice in general, please contact Vicki Shaw, Prison Dharma Network, P.O. Box 987, Bloomfield, CT 06002. *Inner Corrections* would be an invaluable tool for such work. This is a moving, eye-opening book.

Ellen Gwynn is a lawyer in Tallahassee, Florida and a member of the Cypress Tree Zen Center. □



BUDDHIST PEACE FELLOWSHIP JOURNAL

The Buddhist Peace Fellowship publishes a quarterly journal of articles by and about spiritual peaceworkers, including Buddhists of all traditions.

Recent issues feature: Joanna Macy, Gary Snyder, Mayumi Oda, Peter Matthiessen, and Robert Aitken-roshi; reports on engaged Buddhism in all parts of the world, including Burma, Central America, and Tibet; and articles on human rights, environmental action, homelessness, AIDS, abortion and Buddhism, and Buddhist responses to the Middle East war.

We invite your inquiry. Please contact Margaret Howe at:

BUDDHIST PEACE FELLOWSHIP
P.O. Box 4650 Berkeley, CA 94704
415-525-8596



ZEN CENTER OF LOS ANGELES

ZCLA offers a year-round zen training program, including two 90-day intensive practice periods per year, under the guidance of Taizan Maezumi Roshi.

June through August 1991

At our Mountain Center

January through March 1992

At our City Center

You are welcome to attend all or part.

ZEN CENTER OF LOS ANGELES
923 South Normandie Avenue
Los Angeles, CA 90006
213/387-2351